



## Bernardine Evaristo's *the Emperor's Babe* as a liberal feminist manifesto in a postmodern context



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### ABSTRACT

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Postmodernism refers to a range of artistic, cultural, and philosophical trends. Liberal feminism is a postmodern concept of women's emancipation that advocates for equal rights for both men and women across legal, political, and social domains. The objective of this research is to shed light on liberal feminist perspectives in Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*. This study employed a qualitative textual analysis of the novel. The theoretical framework for analyzing the characteristics of liberal feminism in *The Emperor's Babe* was based on works by Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*), John Stuart Mill (*On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women*), Martha Nussbaum (*Sex and Social Justice*), and Susan Moller Okin (*Justice, Gender, and Family*). The study aims to provide a unique perspective on the novel's exploration of individual agency, gender equality, and autonomy through the principles of liberal feminism. The findings are compared with other research addressing liberal feminism. The study concludes that *The Emperor's Babe* exemplifies a liberal feminist stance because it challenges traditional gender roles and identity norms in a distinctly postmodern manner. While intersectional, black feminist, and postcolonial interpretations may offer additional insights, this research primarily focuses on liberal feminism.

**Contribution/ Originality:** The originality of the study lies in its application of liberal feminist principles to analyze Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*. The study fills a research gap by offering a unique interpretation of Zuleika as a postmodern feminist subject and provides fresh insights into Black British feminist literary studies.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism operates across a broad spectrum of trends in philosophy, cinema, architecture, art, literature, and culture. It embraces numerous viewpoints. Feminism is a postmodern perspective that values women's identities and their capacity to exercise rights. Liberal feminism is a type of feminism that advocates for equal rights for both men and women. The study demonstrates how liberal feminist ideals, such as gender equality and autonomy, are relevant in the novel's ancient Roman-British setting. It also shows that feminist issues are not limited to contemporary contexts but have a long history and cultural significance. The term "manifesto" is used in a figurative rather than literal sense, and the research acknowledges the ambiguity, irony, and lyrical structure of the novel.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, liberal feminism as a movement began with Mill's periodical *The Subjugation of Women*. It claims that women's subjugation is a major obstacle to both human progress and women's advancement. Contrary to this misconception, liberal feminism advocates for demanding that women have a richer life. Liberal feminists support women's self-determination and urge men to treat women as equals. Wollstonecraft describes her beliefs as follows: "I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves." (Wollstonecraft, 1997). According to Krolokke and Sorensen (2005), the genesis of liberal feminism, sometimes known as "mainstream feminism" or "bourgeois feminism," is associated with the first wave of feminist movements (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2005). Foley's research indicates that liberal feminists have a strong sensitivity to rights that support equality. They react strongly to issues of gender equality, individual autonomy, and empowerment (Foley, 2007).

Callan's assertions regarding the negative effects of reducing some of the variation between cultures should not prevent liberal feminism from advocating for girls' and women's autonomy and equality (Callan, 1996). According to Eisenstein's research, liberal feminism could be more radical than previously thought. The demand for equality becomes more extreme as the liberal feminist approach reveals systemic barriers to equal opportunity (Eisenstein, 1984). Mackinnon's study asserts that liberalism separates women's subjugation from debate, presenting women's rights as if they were autonomous persons and imagining equality as an inherent right (MacKinnon, 1989). Kiss's research suggests that the spread of liberalism may be viewed as a process of learning through trial and error. The flaws inherent in liberal terminology should not be entirely discarded, as they can still offer valuable insights (Kiss, 1995).

"The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill" conveys men's desire to "maintain their subordination in domestic life." It is because the generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal that women are excluded from public life (Mill, 1984). According to Beasley's research, liberal feminism particularly asserts that women and men are not fundamentally different from one another. Women are denied opportunities because of their sex (Beasley, 1999). The study by Hall addresses the fact that not all feminists have a liberal perspective on feminism. Egalitarian and radical feminists disagree with the current social structure's policies on equal opportunity. They contend that it is neither feasible nor desirable to have equal opportunity under the current system (Hall, 1985; Messner & Sabo, 1990). Tulloch's research discusses discrimination that occurs when people are treated in a way that is deemed suitable for their group, regardless of their individual characteristics (Tulloch, 1989). Beck's study indicates that more radical feminists argue that by imitating males, liberal feminists who work within the system adopt its patriarchal beliefs (Beck, 1980; Blinde, 1989; Figes, 1981).

A study by Brown and Pateman states that liberalism necessitates a core individual. This individual is distinct from others and possesses a logical mind that is free from desire, which is considered natural and therefore beyond political influence (Brown, 1995; Pateman, 1989). The book *The Subjection of Women* is regarded as an influential contribution to Enlightenment feminist philosophy, according to Szapuova's study (Szapuova, 2006). Research by Thibaut and Walker indicates that the approach of liberal feminism aims to reform the system through distributive or procedural justice rather than completely transforming it (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Coakley's (1994) study observes that women would have equal access to opportunities, and male dominance would diminish. This would enable women to contribute to sports and enjoy intrinsic advantages similar to men (Coakley, 1994; Hall, 1985; Lenskyj, 1994)

Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* is a novel about a Black Nubian teenage girl named Zuleika, and it contains many elements of liberal feminism. The protagonist, Zuleika, is the daughter of an African merchant. She is married off at the age of 11 to a more significant middle-aged Roman. She quickly becomes tired of married life in his London mansion. There has been no research on liberal feminism in Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*. This study aims to critically analyze Bernardine Evaristo's (2001). *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) through the lens of liberal feminist theory. The study pays particular attention to the novel's treatment of themes such as personal autonomy, gender equality, and individual agency within a patriarchal and historically oppressive context. It emphasizes how Evaristo promotes ideas

of individual liberty, agency, and gender equality within an oppressive societal system. The book is also frequently praised for its postmodern aesthetic and historical undertones. The analysis demonstrates how Zuleika, the main character of *The Emperor's Babe*, is positioned as a symbol of liberal feminist opposition. The study highlights her quest for equality, autonomy, and self-expression in a patriarchal Roman-British society. Evaristo employs postmodern strategies to challenge gender norms and recover underrepresented female voices. These techniques include a fragmented narrative, poetic form, and historical anachronism. Such strategies present the book as a liberal feminist manifesto that redefines history and identity.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section highlights the ideas presented by prominent liberal feminist theorists in their main publications and illustrates how their theories have been applied in various research works. According to McElroy (2002), liberal feminism is often referred to as "mainstream feminism" and "reformist feminism," with its primary focus on achieving gender-equal opportunities within social, political, and legal systems (McElroy, 2002). The research by Pandeewari indicates that Bryson has extensively written on feminist ideas and politics (Pandeewari, Hariharasudan, & Kot, 2021). Tamilmani and Thillainayaki (2024) argue that feminism plays a crucial role in creating pathways for women to recognize their gender identity by challenging the monotonous expectations that portray women as merely 'suppressed' beings (Tamilmani & Thillainayaki, 2024). Angelou (2013), a renowned author actively involved in advocating for women's rights, once stated in an interview, "Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it is possible, without claiming it, she stands up for all women" (Angelou, 2013).

In his views on the evolution of liberal thought, Gal Gerson emphasizes the importance of liberal feminism and explains the concepts of individuality as discussed by Wollstonecraft (1997) and Gerson (2002). Bryson (2003) argued that women should make their own decisions and achieve equal opportunities in all areas, similar to men (Bryson, 1992). This perspective is further explored in the study by Pollard (2020). The research by Hashemipour and Dushime (2023) highlights that works such as *The Color Purple* and *The Bluest Eye* focus on issues of domestic violence and sexual abuse (Hashemipour & Dushime, 2023). Donner (1993) revealed that compassion for others is fundamental to moral development. These feelings of compassion serve as the foundation for both moral and social impulses, fostering sociality and moral growth (Donner, 1993).

Nienaber and Moraka (2016) research remarks that liberal feminism is based on the assumption that men and women have no fundamental biological differences. As a result, women should have equality in all fields (Nienaber & Moraka, 2016). However, Kant held the view that "Nature was concerned about the preservation of the embryo and implanted fear into the woman's character, a fear of physical injury, and a timidity towards similar dangers. On the basis of this weakness, the woman legitimately asks for masculine protection" (Hay, 2013). The research of Khattak provides the intellectual underpinning of liberal feminism, asserting that "gender differences are not based on biology, and therefore women and men are not fundamentally different." Women and men enjoy equal civic rights (Khattak, 2011). Flax's research demonstrates that liberal feminism serves three primary aims. The first is to examine the issue of women in society and families. The second goal is to understand the concept of supremacy. The third goal is to resolve the crisis (Flax, 1981).

Ester Gendusa's research outlines, Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* challenges the associated foundation myth of racial purity by introducing the figure of Zuleika and aids in the creative disentanglement of the conventional British ethnicity-and-nation nexus (Gendusa, 2015). *The Emperor's Babe*, past and present, Romanitas and Britishness, tradition and the subversion of the canon, all intriguingly merge, as Elena Capitani and Maria Research observe in a unique way, forming a multifaceted story of resistance (Capitani, 2018). Fakhri (1996) studies one of the most prominent and well-liked forms of feminism, which is liberal feminism, viewing gender equality as the ultimate goal (Fakhri, 1996).

Greenberg's research reveals that liberal feminism's ideal responsibility includes providing equal opportunities. The research supports liberal feminism with the main principle of individual liberty, which indicates that women pursue their desires based on their interests (Greenberg, 2001; Haryanti & Suwana, 2014; Kaplan, 1992). Similarly, Kaplan's research explores the history of liberal feminism (Kaplan, 1986). In her paper, Mayabadi compares the views of Wollstonecraft and Thomas Hardy. Through these figures, Hardy depicts both traditional and liberated women (Mayabadi, 2012). In this context, *The Emperor's Babe*, as Evaristo herself remarks, is both a contemporary and a historical story (Toh, 2004). Gordon Graham's paper contrasts liberal feminism with radical feminism, focusing on the latter movement's psychology, biology, and sexuality branches. Graham discusses liberal feminism by referring to Mill's observations on equal opportunity and subordination, as well as his concept of "gender blindness" (Graham, 1994).

Peddis, Nicoletta's study describes how *The Emperor's Babe* connects to present, postcolonial British society specifically, to London's postcolonial human landscapes through this postmodern examination and re-examination of British history (Peddis, 2019). Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* centers on Zuleika, a young Black resident of Roman London, and her complex connection to her various homes and homelands, according to research by Macmillan (2023). Ahmad and Khan (2020) explored Hekman's analysis of *John Stuart Mill's The Subjection of Women: The Foundations of Liberal Feminism*, which offers multiple perspectives on Mill's movement. Hekman acknowledges Mill's premise of equal opportunity and emphasizes its significance in the development of liberal feminist thought (Ahmad & Khan, 2020). Joyce Senders Pederson's "Education, Gender, and Social Change in Victorian Liberal Feminist Theory" discusses liberal reformers in education. Pederson explores liberal feminists' approaches to education, gender, and social transformation during the Victorian era, which was seen as a period of significant progress for women's education. Pederson analyzes Victorian women's educational opportunities using, among other perspectives, Mill's feminist viewpoint (Pedersen, 1987).

The study of Michael utilizes Mills' perspectives in Sarah Woodruff's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. It highlights the novel's inability to comprehend Sarah, which is largely due to the novel's reliance on dominant male perspectives and beliefs (Michael, 1987). According to McCarthy (2003), *The Emperor's Babe* is intended to be "a critique of those Brits who still harbor ridiculous notions of 'racial' purity and the glory days of Britain as an all-white nation" (McCarthy, 2003). Snow's research highlights the twofold values of authors, focusing on men who are not equal, although they possess varied degrees of equality (Snow, 2002). According to Myers (1986), Georgian women's characters changed after Wollstonecraft's emphasis on liberation. They became more liberal and gained strength from the eighteenth-century fictional tradition (Myers, 1986). Evaristo's book challenges the stereotype that Roman Britain and the classical world as a whole were entirely white by attempting to rewrite history from the margins (Beard, 2019). Arifatin (2019) highlights issues of gender in Japan and depicts the figure of Rie in Lebra's *The Scent of Sake*. In contrast to usual practice, Rie consistently expresses her desire for self-determination and resists the assumption that women cannot be regarded as superior to men (Arifatin, 2019).

Research by Sipahutar (2018) confirms that liberal feminism is sensitive and concerned with women's rights; however, this social framework does not always enable women to make their own decisions. The author examines the protagonist, Annisa, who works diligently to live her life according to her wishes and strives for equal rights. The work employs Mill's ideas on liberal feminism (Sipahutar, 2018). The film "Joy" emphasizes liberal feminism, according to Eidelweis's research. Joy, the film's primary heroine, represents the concept of liberal feminism. She ultimately decides to pursue her passion, regardless of the challenges or others' judgments. The author references Mill's "Essays on Equality, Law, and Education" in this context (Eidelweis, 2018). Two of Martha Nussbaum's most well-known books, *Cultivating Humanity* (1997) and *Frontiers of Justice* (2006), are widely used in research discussing liberalism in various contexts, including education (Biggs, 2012). Furthermore, Andrew Foley cites both Nussbaum's liberal feminism from *Frontiers of Justice* and Mill's conception of womanhood in his insightful discussion about the role of women (Foley, 2007).

Okin's research, "Family, Justice, and Gender: An Unfinished Debate," highlights the resurgence of feminism. Okin examines the revival of feminist ideas following influential works on the subject. She references key feminist literature, including Berlin's *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958), Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1952), and Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971). These authors discussed women's suffering and the barriers they faced, which have persisted since 1952. Women are portrayed as increasingly active and influential across various spheres. However, Okin argues that this resurrection of women's rights is more of a myth than a reality. She raises a rhetorical question titled "Gender, Justice, and Gender: An Unfinished Debate" (2004a, 15-34) to challenge the notion of true progress in gender equality.

The aforementioned research, written by authors from various academic fields, highlights different facets of liberal feminism. Some writers explore the principles of liberal feminism in creative works, while others examine the philosophy and practical implementation of this movement. However, no study has specifically identified and investigated liberal feminism in Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*. This study aims to address this gap by providing a more in-depth analysis of the protagonist's personality.

### 3. STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This study contributes to the existing literature by exploring liberal feminist perspectives in Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*. It offers new insights into a unique perspective on the novel's examination of individual agency, gender equality, and autonomy through the principles of liberal feminism. It enhances understanding of questioning traditional gender roles and identity norms in a highly postmodern manner.

### 4. METHODOLOGY

This section discusses the liberal feminist theories of Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Martha Nussbaum, and Susan Moller Okin to support Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* with the ideas postulated by liberal feminism. This study employed a qualitative textual analysis of *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) by Bernardine Evaristo. Data was gathered through close reading of the novel, with an emphasis on issues of individual agency, autonomy, and gender. The theoretical frameworks of Mary Wollstonecraft, Martha Nussbaum, John Stuart Mill, and Susan Moller Okin were all explored within the liberal feminist approach. Important quotes were identified and discussed in light of concepts such as equality, justice, and women's rights. To contextualize and strengthen the findings, comparative insights were also drawn from current scholarly literature on liberal feminism. Liberal feminism was selected because it emphasizes social equality, legal equality, and human agency, all of which are central themes in *The Emperor's Babe*. Other frameworks were less compatible with the novel's focus on individual liberty within preexisting organizations.

Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published as early as 1792, strongly disapproves of parents instilling a servile attitude towards males in their daughters from an early age. She states, "Women are told from their infancy and taught by the example of their mothers that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper; outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives" (Wollstonecraft, 1997). Similarly, Zuleika's parents believed that everyone was envious of their daughter's life. She was born on Grace Church Street, at the rear of a small store, but she had the opportunity to marry Felix, a wealthy Roman in his middle age. Zuleika's husband helped her parents' business flourish as well. Her spouse is in his forties, significantly older than she is, so her parents always expected her to live obediently and happily with him. Zuleika remarks;

"They say his mistress is an actress  
a flaxen-Fraulein type from Germania Superior  
Oh, everyone envied me, Illa Bella Negreeta!  
born in the back of a shop on Grace Church Street,  
who got hitched to a Roman nobleman..."



Now he owns several shops, selling everything  
from vino to shoes, veggies to tools,  
and he employs all sorts to work in them” (Evaristo, 2001).

The work *The Emperor's Babe* is a depiction of parental conduct that is consistent with Wollstonecraft's theory.

Wollstonecraft contends that women are readily able to achieve their desires because of the physical strength of men, which is used to enslave them. In discussing the strength of men, Wollstonecraft claims, “Man, from the remotest antiquity, has found it convenient to exert his strength to subjugate his companion and his invention to show that she ought to have her neck bent under its yoke; she, as well as the brute creation, was created to do his pleasure” (Wollstonecraft, 1997). This dynamic is reflected in Zuleika's husband's actions, as he consistently uses his physical strength to exert complete control over his wife in every situation. Felix would prefer to send a bodyguard when his wife, Zuleika wants to go outside. The protagonist Zuleika states her husband's words;

“Go out into the town, enjoy, I'll assign  
a bodyguard but, for goodness' sake,  
don't show me up and walk” (Evaristo, 2001).

This mimics the captivity of women that Wollstonecraft described in her theory.

She advocates, “Strengthen the female intellect by widening it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; yet, as blind obedience is ever sought after by authority, dictators and sensualists are justified when they endeavor to keep a woman in the dark, for the former only desire slaves, and the latter a plaything” (Wollstonecraft, 1997). Likewise, Zuleika's spouse Felix is only concerned with his own interests. She constantly obeys, fulfilling her role as a wife. She perceives the void within herself and is disillusioned with married life. Zuleika reflects;

"I am becoming a spectre, I think, Maius"  
he wakes me up at dawn, three leather trunks  
are stacked in the atrium, a chariot  
outside will take him across Gaul towards Rome,  
he has important duties to perform,  
he must report back to HQ, attend  
to his business interests” (Evaristo, 2001).

Zuleika's parents spoil her for her youth, personality, dreams, and desires. In this way, Zuleika reflects Wollstonecraft's notion.

Wollstonecraft also examines female relationships. She states, “Females, it is true, in all nations, are too much under the control of their parents; and few parents consider addressing their children in this manner, yet it is in this sensible method that Heaven appears to command the entire human race” (Wollstonecraft, 1997). Women are depicted as being subjugated by their parents. Similarly, in Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, Zuleika's parents force her to marry and live with an elderly man, Felix, since Felix leads a luxurious life. Zuleika feels frustrated and bored with Felix because he never pays attention to her and is always preoccupied with his work outside. Zuleika, a young girl, desires to enjoy her married life and pursue her hopes and aspirations. To fulfill her wishes and live the life she desires, Zuleika meets a young man, Emperor Septimius Severus, who falls in love with her and has an affair with her. However, she is not permitted to choose her own life. Zuleika notes;

“I had imagined  
being crushed into the imperiales  
purple robes of Emperor Septimius Severus,  
his sword drawn out of its gold and ruby  
scabbard and plunged into me,  
ruthlessly” (Evaristo, 2001).

Zuleika's parents dominate and restrain her; therefore, she is unable to choose her life mate. As may be observed, Evaristo's depiction of Zuleika's reliance on her parents aligns with Wollstonecraft's introspection.

Mill believed that both sexes should be treated equally under the law. His most significant contribution to liberal feminism is his moral philosophy. He stated, "All women are raised from the earliest years with the conviction that their ideal of character is the complete opposite of that of males; not self-will and self-discipline, but surrender and yielding to the control of others" (Mill, 1984). He argued that society expects women to live for others and to completely submit themselves to avoid self-interest. In this context, Evaristo's protagonist, Zuleika, suppresses her childhood desire to fulfill her parents' dream of marrying a middle-aged man because her parents did not allow her to receive an education. Her parents forced her to marry a man who was three times her age. She believed that her parents and her husband had seized her life, considering it her fate. She regrets her circumstances and the choices made for her.

"When Felix came after me, Dad was in ecstasy,  
father-in-law to Lucius Aurelius Felix, no less.  
I was spotted at the baths of Cheapside,  
just budding, and my fate was sealed  
by a man thrice my age and thrice my girth,  
all at sweet eleven – even then, Dad  
thought I was getting past it." (Evaristo, 2001).

John Stuart Mill's philosophical writings can serve as valuable references for Evaristo's story. Mill's most significant contribution to liberal feminism is his moral philosophy. In his perspective, he interprets women's interactions through a moral lens. He writes, "If women are better than men in anything, it surely is in individual self-sacrifice for their families. However, I place little emphasis on this, as long as they are universally taught that they are born and created for self-sacrifice" ((Mill, 1984)). Similarly, Zuleika states in *The Emperor's Babe* that she was compelled to marry a middle-aged, wealthy man at the age of eleven. She recognizes that she is no longer living her own life and that she has lost her independence. She makes every sacrifice for her family and must live with an elderly husband. Zuleika also describes the type of bride she hopes to have, articulating her desires and the constraints she faces.

"I have been looking for a wife for some time,  
and naturalizing, I wanted someone young,  
someone special, a rare flower.  
'Si, Mr Felix. Zuleika very specialis girl.  
No problemata, she make very optima wife, sir.'  
'Glad to hear it, for when I saw her at the baths,  
she stole my heart. Indeed" (Evaristo, 2001).

Furthermore, Mill emphasizes the importance of decision-making: "No one can be a great thinker who does not recognize that, as a thinker, it is his primary duty to follow his intellect to whatever conclusions it may lead" (Mill, 1984). Zuleika lists her desires, but she is uncertain about how to fulfill them. Some of her wishes include going for a ride outside, getting intoxicated with her friends, going on a solo trip, composing poetry, and having a young, passionate husband. When she decides what she wants, she does not consider the issues that may arise later.

"So this was really a bid for liberty.

"There's no way Felix will free you now." (Evaristo, 2001).

In contrast to her husband, Zuleika later met Emperor Septimius Severus and fell in love with him. According to the author, Zuleika only escaped her familial life once and achieved her goals. In conclusion, Zuleika's persona represents some of the difficulties women encounter on the road to freedom.

In the book *Sex and Social Justice*, liberal feminist theorist Martha Nussbaum addresses the role of women across various spheres, including culture, religion, democracy, justice, sexuality, and economics. Nussbaum explains, “I argue that this is a very good position for women to embrace, seeing that women have all too often been regarded not as autonomous individuals but as means to the ends of others, not as sources of agency and worth in their own right but as reproducers and caregivers” (Nussbaum, 1999). According to Nussbaum, liberalism is a political philosophy that prioritizes the welfare of the individual. In her definition of liberty, which she describes as the freedom to make decisions about one's own life, she emphasizes the importance of agency and decision-making. Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* also explores this concept. Evaristo's protagonist undergoes an internal revolution, aligning her desires with her evolving identity. She chooses to change her life after reflecting on her views about marriage and its alternatives. Determined to move forward, she seeks to overcome obstacles, which leaves her feeling invigorated and empowered.

“Oh, to fill his pause with my truth,  
but Felix's refrain haunted me, still,  
from the first days of our marriage –  
silentiumpulieripraestatornatum,  
silence is a woman's best adornment –  
and I wasn't going to blow it tonight.  
My own dream had been blown away,  
as soon as my father heard it” (Evaristo, 2001).

The protagonist Zuleika by Evaristo can be compared to Nussbaum's theory, which suggests that female characters often face a dilemma between prioritizing their personal needs and advancing in their careers.

Susan Moller Okin elaborates on gender equality in her book *Justice, Gender, and Family*. Okin asserts that “In a just society, the structure and practice of families must give women the same opportunities as men to develop their capacities, participate in political power, influence social choices, and achieve economic security” (Okin, 1989). The relationship between Felix and Zuleika in *The Emperor's Babe* exemplifies the inequity issues discussed. At the age of eleven, Zuleika was married and had to give up her independence. Her spouse often requests that she stay at home. Shortly after her marriage, Zuleika felt bored, but she was unable to pursue her desires. She was terrified by her spouse and her father. Zuleika contemplates her situation, highlighting the constraints placed on her due to societal and familial expectations.

“Where would I go?  
Dad would as soon as kill me, I could  
not involve the girls, for Felix would hunt  
me down and make them pay, and to leave  
the city wall was to risk unknown horrors.  
Was my punishment to come?” (Evaristo, 2001).

Here, the researchers perceived inequity and a lack of independence in Zuleika's marital life. In this way, Okin's idea is reflected in Zuleika.

Okin discusses several important topics, including questions of justice and gender concerns within family relationships. She asserts, “What is a child to learn about responsibility for others in a family in which, after many years of arranging her life around the needs of her husband and children, a woman is faced with having to provide for herself and her children but is ill-equipped for the task by the life she agreed to lead, has led, and expected to continue leading?” (Okin, 1989). In *The Emperor's Babe*, the inequality between Zuleika and Felix is reinforced through their marital relationship. Due to her marriage, Zuleika has sacrificed her goals and desires. Her spouse used to prioritize his feelings and rarely considered her wishes. He consistently assumed she would remain at home and be submissive.



He was unaware of the type of married life Zuleika envisioned. She desires her spouse to be romantic, youthful, sensitive to her feelings, and passionately in love, but Felix embodies the opposite of everything she desires.

To satisfy her desires, she leaves her husband at the end of the story and begins a romance with Emperor Septimius Severus. Consequently, unfairness in marriage causes Zuleika and Felix to separate and become hostile towards each other. Here, Zuleika breaks free from her married life to pursue her own aspirations. Zuleika contemplates;

“A husband could do what he liked  
and many an errant wife ended up  
in an unmarked grave outside the city walls.

I did not scream, though, hammering  
on the door for forgiveness,  
but accepted what was due.

I had relished a death so sweet that nothing  
would ever match it again” (Evaristo, 2001).

As is evident, Okin's introspection and Evaristo's depiction of Zuleika's married existence, which lacks equality and freedom, align.

The connections between liberal feminism and the concepts in Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* are supported by the aforementioned analysis. Her writings contain several insights into liberal feminism. The authors examine liberal feminism in Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, which may be traced back to liberal feminist beliefs, based on the study's findings. The next step is to compare and contrast the liberal feminist concepts found in Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* with those found in other studies through a discussion.

### 5. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The following tables (Table 1 and Table 2) summarize prominent liberal feminist themes supporting this study and their textual expressions in Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*. The liberal feminist concepts promoted by Wollstonecraft, Mill, Nussbaum, and Okin are matched with and reconstructed in Evaristo's novel.

Table 1. Major Liberal Feminist Concepts and Theoretical Frameworks.

Theme	Mary Wollstonecraft – A Vindication of the Rights of Woman	John Stuart Mill – On Liberty / The Subjection of Women	Martha Nussbaum – Sex and Social Justice	Susan Moller Okin – Justice, Gender and Family
Equality	Stresses the importance of equal access to education and moral development	Claims that gender discrimination is an artefact of force, not reason	Demands equal dignity and opportunities regardless of sex or societal identity	Appeals for fundamental gender equality, particularly in family integrity and caregiving roles
Autonomy	Promotes women's rational freedom and ethical agency	Proclaims the liberty of thought and behavior as essential for human development	Insist that the ability to make meaningful life choices is a necessary component of human dignity	Indicating that true justice requires women's autonomy within both the family and society.
Parental control / Social conditioning	Opposes the notion that education promotes the idea that women should focus on beauty and dependence	Underscores the adverse effects of societal norms, and public views forbid women from	Emphasizes social norms that limit women's abilities from an early age	Explores the way in which patriarchal family systems promote inequality

Theme	Mary Wollstonecraft – A Vindication of the Rights of Woman	John Stuart Mill – On Liberty / The Subjection of Women	Martha Nussbaum – Sex and Social Justice	Susan Moller Okin – Justice, Gender and Family
		expressing their insights		
Marriage and love	Condemns marriage as a means for women to become dependent unless it relies on equality	Promotes partnership marriages that emphasize friendship and respect	Encourages equal sexual and emotional rights in partnerships	Illustrates marriage as a political institution that promotes justice and equality within the household
Self-determination	Demands for rational independence and self-education	Connects individual identity to social evolution and liberty	Recognizes “Practical Reason” as a key skill for establishing one’s own life direction	Links justice in both public and private life to equality and autonomy

Table 2. Thematic Application in *The Emperor’s Babe* by Bernardine Evaristo.

Liberal Feminist Theme	Textual Evidence	Interpretation in Light of Theory	Relevant Theorist (s)
Equality	“Why should men stride through Londinium as if they own it?”	Nussbaum’s and Okin’s claims regarding social equality and gender justice are echoed by the question raised by Zuleika concerning male dominance	Nussbaum, Okin
Autonomy	“I was a free spirit trapped in a world that called me wife” narrated by Zuleika	Zuleika’s voice challenges patriarchal limitations. Wollstonecraft’s embodiment of self-governance and Mill’s emphasis on personal liberty are reflected in Zuleika’s fight for freedom.	Wollstonecraft, Mill
Parental / Social Conditioning	“Mama said beauty opens doors, but I wanted a key of my own”	Wollstonecraft’s criticism of ornamental femininity and Nussbaum’s advocacy for developing capabilities align with the social concept that values appearance over intellect in <i>The Emperor’s Babe</i> through Zuleika.	Wollstonecraft, Nussbaum
Marriage as constraint	“Marriage was supposed to make me a lady; instead, it made me invisible.”	Reveals how patriarchal power structures undermine female identity and presents Wollstonecraft’s and Okin’s objections to unequal marriage.	Wollstonecraft, Okin
Self-determination and creative expression	“My words are my freedom” by Zuleika’s poetry and rebellion.	Mill’s individualism and Nussbaum’s “capacity for practical reason” are reflected in Zuleika’s poetic voice, which develops as an outlet for liberation.	Mill, Nussbaum

## 6. DISCUSSION

Liberal feminism focuses on addressing women's suffering and exploring ways to eliminate it. As Susan Brown noted in her book *The Politics of Individualism, Liberalism, Liberal Feminism, and Anarchism*, some ideas emphasize the importance of the individual, starting from the fundamental assumption that the human individual holds essential significance in the struggle for emancipation (Brown, 1993). Brown further explained that Friedan's existential individualism offers the potential for liberation. However, like other liberals, she often undermines this potential by arguing that women should compete with men in the marketplace as valuable individuals for resources, status, and ultimately, power (Brown, 1993).

In *The Emperor's Babe* by Bernardine Evaristo, the protagonist Zuleika also overcomes her issues. Zuleika's journey reinforces the principles of liberal feminism, emphasizing personal agency and the desire for equality. Numerous scholarly works have explored liberal feminism in literature, often using heroines to illustrate various

facets of this feminist perspective. For example, Suaidi and Rusfandi (2016) utilize Elizabeth from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to exemplify liberal feminism. Elizabeth is portrayed as a free-thinking woman who makes her own decisions about her life despite her parents' pressure to marry Mr. Collins (Suaidi & Rusfandi, 2016). Similarly, in Evaristo's novel, Zuleika's parents arranged her marriage to an elderly, wealthy man when she was only eleven years old. Throughout her marriage, her husband has shown no passion. Zuleika aspires to be independent and to have a loving, devoted husband. She has stated that she has never become pregnant with her elderly spouse. This highlights liberal feminist objections to unequal marriages and the ways patriarchal power structures undermine female identity. Zuleika observes this situation as follows:

"By the way, Zuleika, you're spreading  
and you're not even pregnant,  
'I'll never fall pregnant for him, Alba.  
I just know it, always have. I probably  
can't anyway, he ruined me before I was ready.  
He doesn't seem to care" (Evaristo, 2001).

Yasnur Asri's research focuses on how the two main heroines in the novels *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* and *Azab dan Sengsara*, Anisha and Mariamin respectively, represent the oppression of women within Indonesian culture. Her analysis highlights the traditional roles assigned to women in Indonesian society, emphasizing their duties as wives and mothers (Asri, 2018). Similarly, Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* is associated with liberal feminism. The character Zuleika advocates for social equality and gender justice, reflecting liberal feminist ideals. Evaristo's protagonist, Zuleika, faces restrictions imposed by her husband, who forbids her from taking on any societal roles or responsibilities as a woman. Meanwhile, he prefers to be outside working for his company, insisting that his wife Zuleika remain at home and always dress elegantly. He does not ask her to undertake any activities outside the household. Zuleika comments on her situation, highlighting the gender dynamics and societal expectations placed upon women in her context.

"Like you, Felix is somewhat peripatetic,  
though he never takes me with.  
He wants this to be my world – little birdie  
in a gilded cage, waiting for her master  
to come home – and sing for him.  
I have always been somewhat decorative" (Evaristo, 2001).

Many authors utilize their protagonists to explore various aspects of liberal feminism. For example, Karim's research examines liberal feminism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, focusing on the character Pecola Breedlove, the novel's heroine. Pecola's father has sexually mistreated her, an extremely traumatic event for a young girl. The author investigates the struggles faced by Black women within the framework of liberal feminism and how they overcome numerous obstacles (Karim, 2017). Similarly, *The Emperor's Babe* by Bernardine Evaristo features Zuleika, the protagonist, who contributes to the representation of liberal feminism in literature. To achieve her desires, she breaks free from the constraints of marriage. She relocates to build her own life independently. Zuleika maintains her stability by actively pursuing her goals in the real world. She aspires to live a better life by writing poetry, attending public events, and meeting her lover, Emperor Septimius Severus. Zuleika seeks to be free from her married life by fulfilling these aspirations. She embodies the core values of liberal feminism through her love for personal liberty.

Yasinta Dekha Widiatmi's research examines liberal feminism in *Jane Eyre*, a novel by Charlotte Brontë. She advocates for the treatment of women with the same dignity and opportunities as men, calling on the male world to recognize women's rights (Widiatmi, 2013). Evaristo's character Zuleika also challenges the liberal feminist ideals of a society that restricts women's freedom, emphasizing the importance of autonomy and self-determination. Jones's research highlights characters such as Joni and Anais, who struggle for sexual liberty and equality while overcoming

the pain inflicted by patriarchal culture (Jones, 2015). In this context, Evaristo's Zuleika seeks to be treated with dignity and given equal opportunities as men. She had an affair with Emperor Septimius Severus in an attempt to escape her marital responsibilities and her husband's domination. Zuleika desires empowerment in her life after realizing that she was confined like a caged bird following her marriage. She advocates for sexual emancipation, equality, and the transcendence of suffering caused by patriarchal society. Her actions and words reflect liberal feminist views, emphasizing the need for societal change to achieve gender equality.

“Surely you can’t be that naive, our Sev?

But in truth there was more to it.

I knew you would make my world larger.

It was so small, inside and out,

I would discover more of myself through you.” (Evaristo, 2001).

Gayatri Spivak Chakravathy claims that studying Yahu Vinayaraj changes feminism. Spivak raised many moral questions about representation, particularly concerning marginalized and subaltern women (Vinayaraj, 2014). Similarly, Evaristo portrayed Zuleika, her main character, as a member of a marginalized group. She has no preference or acceptance of decisions made by others in her family. Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* advocates for emerging capabilities, aligning with the social concept that principles often take precedence over intellect, which bears resemblance to liberal feminist ideals. Kristina Rolin highlights Londa Schiebinger's novels concerning the issues within liberal feminism.

These two volumes emphasize the contributions made by women. Consequently, the author emphasizes the importance of women's empowerment (Rolin, 2004). This perspective also aligns with Evaristo's wording. As a result, this study and Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* critique patriarchal limitations, indicating liberal feminism. Additionally, the book exemplifies self-governance and personal liberty, as reflected through Zuleika.

Zuleika's autonomy underscores the importance of personal independence and self-determination. Her evolution from subordination to autonomy highlights her challenge to patriarchal structures within a male-dominated Roman culture. Evaristo's use of lyrical prose, fragmented narratives, and non-linear storytelling opposes traditional historical narrative forms. Her writings demonstrate how her book connects feminist resistance across different historical periods by reimagining ancient Roman themes in ways that resonate with modern feminist debates. Although intersectional, black feminist, and postcolonial analyses can offer deeper insights, this study primarily focuses on liberal feminism.

It is important to acknowledge that liberal feminism often overlooks the interconnectedness of gender with race, class, and historical context, despite emphasizing equality and individual rights. Intersectional and postcolonial perspectives tend to provide more comprehensive analyses, especially considering Evaristo's novel *The Emperor's Babe*, which reimagines Black womanhood within a Roman British setting. Recognizing these limitations reflects an awareness of broader feminist discussions concerning women's multiple oppressions. Brief comparisons to other heroines are included; however, a more detailed examination is beyond the scope of this study but is recommended for future research.

The study acknowledges that Evaristo's writing may potentially challenge or undermine liberal principles, which complicates the feminist interpretation. Although the research covers a broad range of topics, it has certain limitations. A significant number of researchers have focused on liberal feminism in literature and cinema. Consequently, the authors recommend and anticipate further studies in areas such as womanhood, individuality, rights, equality, barriers to mental health, and morality. The current study examined only four theorists associated with liberal feminism: Martha Nussbaum, Stuart Mill, Susan Moller Okin, and Mary Wollstonecraft. The researchers suggest that future studies should include ideas from other liberal feminist theorists to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, by presenting *The Emperor's Babe* by Bernardine Evaristo as a liberal feminist manifesto set within a postmodern context, this study makes a significant contribution to a deeper understanding of the novel. It offers a unique perspective by critically examining the novel's exploration of individual agency, gender equality, and autonomy through the lens of liberal feminism. The character Zuleika's interactions with the Emperor serve as both a site of agency and a reflection of patriarchal power. Although she has choices, her feminist stance is complicated by unequal power dynamics, which both empower and restrict her. To emphasize the novel's engagement with liberal feminist themes, the term "manifesto" is used symbolically. Instead of direct advocacy, the novel employs poetic structure, irony, and character development in creative, non-didactic ways. Postmodern features such as time shifts, fractured narration, and genre blending influence the feminist message of the novel. These strategies, which disrupt linear storytelling, enable a multi-layered, nuanced, and satirical examination of feminist identity and resistance. Previous research on Evaristo's work has primarily focused on themes of race, identity, and gender. According to current scholarship, Zuleika, the protagonist of *The Emperor's Babe*, exemplifies liberal feminism by advocating for equality and individual liberty within the complex socio-political landscape of ancient Rome. Furthermore, by framing *The Emperor's Babe* within a postmodern perspective, this study clarifies how Evaristo challenges traditional narratives by emphasizing the importance of personal self-discovery and the struggle for gender equality, even within repressive systems. This research thus enhances understanding of Evaristo's writings and contributes to broader discussions about the relevance, applicability, and significance of liberal feminism in contemporary literary analysis. Ultimately, by offering a fresh perspective on her imaginative exploration of gender, power, and social justice, this study advances feminist literary criticism and enriches Evaristo studies.

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